

VZCZCXYZ0001
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHMK #0891/01 1421403
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 221403Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY MANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4763
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHBVAKS/COMUSNAVCENT PRIORITY

S E C R E T MANAMA 000891

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/13/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [BA](#) [BILAT](#) [POL](#) [REFORM](#)
SUBJECT: BAHRAINI POLITICAL SCENE PART I: GOVERNMENT
HARASSES DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS AS ELECTIONS APPROACH

REF: A. MANAMA 0836
[1](#)B. MANAMA 0765
[1](#)C. MANAMA 0759

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (S) The forced departure of NDI's project director on May 12 is just one example of actions taken by elements within the government and ruling family to exert increased control over the political environment in the run-up to parliamentary and municipal council elections later this year. According to several senior Bahraini officials, the GOB wants NDI to operate in the country under the leadership of a new director. The government objected to the former director, seeing him as too close and sympathetic to the opposition, particularly Shia oppositionists. The Bahrain Transparency Society, which worked closely with NDI on various democracy-related activities and is a MEPI implementer, was the object of a GOB investigation into alleged financial improprieties and was forced to suspend its activities while it reconstituted its board of directors. To preempt requests, the Minister of Social Development announced that Bahrain would not permit any election monitors, either international or domestic. Although King Hamad continues to steadfastly pronounce his support for Shia opposition society participation in the elections as part of his personal reform effort, in private conversations he has said that Bahrain's Shia could not be trusted because of their ties to Iran and NDI could not expect to come to Bahrain and push American-style democracy. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The May 12 departure of National Democratic Institute (NDI) program director Fawzi Guleid (reftels) is but one manifestation of an apparent strategy by elements within the ruling Al Khalifa family and government to attempt to control the political scene and influence the results of the upcoming parliamentary and municipal elections. According to well-placed sources, there are those who advocate continued reform and openness while others want to circle the wagons to protect their authority against moves by oppositionists to develop a power base within the elected lower house of parliament. Part I of this two-part series looks at GOB harassment of civil society groups supporting political reform, and the press campaign against them. Part II explores dynamics within the royal family as it reacts to the political challenge posed by opposition participation in the elections.

13. (C) Several Bahraini officials have told the Embassy that the government wants NDI to work in the country, and they hope NDI re-engages soon with the Bahrain Institute of Political Development to conclude a memorandum of understanding governing NDI's activities and status. MFA Assistant Under Secretary Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa told a visiting delegation led by PM A/S Hillen, and EmbOffs separately, that the GOB objected to Guleid, not to NDI. Shaikh Abdul Aziz told Pol/Econ Chief that Guleid, as a naturalized American citizen of Somali origin, has an innate antipathy toward the regimes of the Gulf, defining the situation in terms of the haves and have-nots. According to this argument, Guleid would naturally be drawn to oppositionists, in particular the Shia, who contend that although they represent the majority of Bahrain's citizens, they face prejudice and discrimination. Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that Bahrain would have no problem working with an NDI director "with blonde hair and blue eyes," remarking that such a person would not be accepted in the same way by the opposition or have as much influence as Guleid. (Comment: Any new director would not be as fully steeped in Bahrain's political culture as Guleid is, and would not be as immediately effective in promoting political participation at this late stage in the election process.)

14. (C) NDI has been the object of a virulent press campaign against it that peaked in the week following Guleid's May 12 departure. Newspapers and columnists opposed to NDI, in particular the Sunni-dominated Al Watan and Akhbar Al Khaleej, have launched ad hominem attacks on Guleid, NDI, and the United States. (Other papers have taken more balanced or even strongly supportive positions, such as Al Wasat and columnist Sawzan Al Shaer of Al Watan.) A May 20 article in Arabic daily Al Watan, which is alleged to have strong links to the Royal Court, said that NDI and other "research and intelligence institutions" lay the groundwork for a new kind of international interference in countries called "colored coups," a reference to the rose and orange revolutions of Georgia and Ukraine. Columnist Hafedh Al Shaikh from Arabic daily Akhbar Al Khaleej wrote on May 16 that he is pleased NDI departed Bahrain because the institute had gone too far in inciting various groups against each other and "playing a dirty and destructive role with an imperialist flavor." Al Watan accused NDI of "being controlled by Jewish leaders who are known to have Zionist inclinations." Akhbar Al Khaleej columnist Sayed Zahra wrote on May 14 that "NDI is nothing more than a tool of U.S. sabotage and destruction and interference in countries' domestic affairs."

Transparency Society Investigated

15. (C) Another organization to face GOB harassment is the Bahrain Transparency Society (BTS), the local branch of Transparency International headed by Jasim Al Ajmi. BTS has received several MEPI grants and periodically co-hosted conferences and workshops with NDI. Registered as an NGO with the Ministry of Social Development (MSD), BTS is focused on election monitoring and transparency in political decision-making on issues such as funding election campaigns and drawing electoral constituencies, sensitive issues in Bahrain. BTS monitored elections for the board of the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) in early 2006, earning public praise for its work from Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa. It also monitored the 2002 parliamentary elections with the last-minute approval of the government.

16. (C) Even before the BCCI elections, Minister of Social Development Fatima Al Baloushi announced that BTS had violated its own charter by deciding to reduce the number of members of its board from nine to five without the approval of her ministry, and ordered BTS to annul internal board elections. She also stated that the ministry was

investigating alleged financial improprieties committed by BTS. (Note: We later learned that the funds at the heart of the investigation were from a MEPI small grant that, for bureaucratic reasons, had not yet been transferred to BTS. MSD apparently believed someone at BTS had stolen the money.)

Multiple investigations conducted by MSD auditors failed to turn up any wrongdoing and Al Baloushi was eventually forced to admit publicly that BTS's books were clean. In doing so, however, she ordered the board disbanded, appointed an acting chairman, and demanded that BTS conduct no activities until it held new elections for the board. The society acted promptly and within weeks a new nine-member board was elected and Al Ajmi was again named chairman. The net result of this drawn-out incident was the status-quo-ante, with only time and energy wasted.

NDI, BTS, Agents of the USG?

17. (C) As an organization that is outspoken in its support for political reform and openness, BTS has also fared poorly in certain newspapers. On May 17, Al Watan wrote that NDI "helped create, supported, and funded" BTS to use it as a vehicle for its suspicious activities in the country. On May 13, Al Watan stated that the U.S. Embassy wanted BTS to monitor Bahrain's elections. It continued, "If BTS monitored the elections and Al Wifaq and Al Waad (Note: Two opposition political societies) did not get a majority in the parliament, would the Embassy ask BTS to describe the elections results as tampered with?"

18. (C) BTS was the leading election monitor for the 2002 elections and MEPI awarded BTS a grant in anticipation of it doing so again later this year. In an apparent attempt to preempt requests, Minister Al Baloushi has said publicly that Bahrain will not allow independent election observers, either international or domestic. Her ministry has informed BTS and the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) that they cannot monitor elections because doing so is not among the groups' stated goals in their articles of association. She said, "I know that they monitored previous elections, but I wasn't in charge then. Now that I'm in charge, I want to make sure that everything is done by the book."

Election Monitoring To Proceed

19. (C) BTS Chair Al Ajmi told Pol/Econ Chief that his group would monitor the elections with or without the government's approval. He explained that 90 percent of the work of monitoring is done well in advance of the elections and is based on research on constituencies, voter registration, candidates' access to the media, and other factors. He expects election day to proceed smoothly, and will make the argument to the government immediately prior to the elections that allowing his staff to observe the polling stations will enhance the credibility of the elections. BHRS Assistant Secretary General Abdullah Al Durazi said publicly that his

SIPDIS
organization will monitor the elections even if it is not allowed to see what is happening behind the scenes. "We will still be at the polling booths, talking to voters and observing what is happening as well as we can. Not having anyone monitoring the elections will create doubt in people's minds."

Embassy's "American Eyes" On Bahrain

10. (C) Al Watan newspaper has also directly attacked the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain. In a provocative April 30 article titled "American Eyes," Al Watan's political editor asks why the Embassy "adopts the negative rhetoric of the opposition bs8cY7zzIt also slammed the Press and Political FSNs at the Embassy,

questioning why these (unnamed) individuals provide such poor guidance to American officers. Per septel, a source claims that the political editor at Al Watan takes instructions from the Royal Court.

King Weighs In On NDI

¶11. (S) The King has repeatedly called for the participation of all of Bahrain's citizens in elections, and following Al Wifaq's decision to take part, he instructed the Minister of the Royal Court to pass along his personal message of congratulations to Al Wifaq Secretary General Shaikh Ali Salman. However, when former U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain Johnny Young (strictly protect) met with the King during a late March - early April private visit to Bahrain, the King said he could not trust Bahrain's Shia as full and equal partners in the political process because their ties to Iran were too strong. The British Ambassador to Bahrain (strictly protect) told the Ambassador that the King had told a visiting UK Minister of State that it was fine if NDI worked under the auspices of the Bahrain Institute for Political Development, but it could not expect to come to Bahrain and unrestrictedly push American-style democracy.

Comment

¶12. (C) The King is faced with a dilemma. He believes in reform and has expended political capital to promote policies in favor of openness and compliance with international norms. He is, however, worried about the consequences of widespread participation by the opposition in the elections and the prospect of a large opposition bloc inside the lower house of parliament. In the context of Iran's aggressive regional policies and Shia empowerment and sectarian strife in Iraq, elements within the ruling family and government, sometimes using closely allied newspapers, have taken steps to undermine the credibility of the opposition. U.S. advocacy for greater democratization in the region is interpreted by some in Bahrain to mean promoting the opposition at the expense of the government. This perception has resulted in the Embassy and civil society groups linked to the USG through programming or shared policy objectives to also become targets of criticism.

MONROE